

THE GENERAL POST OFFICE - 1851

This too is taken from the book mentioned on the previous page. Although it has nothing to add to the study of perfins, I make no apology for including it in the Bulletin. The majority of members are stamp collectors or postal historians first and perfin collectors second. This account of the work of the GPO in London in 1851 makes fascinating reading for anyone who collects postage stamps of any kind.

"The General Post Office, St.Martin's-le-Grand. This extensive building, one of the best-conducted establishments in Europe, was begun in 1818, from the designs of Mr. (now Sir Robert) Smirke; and was opened for public business in 1829; but the interior has undergone various alterations since that time, in consequence of the large increase in the business of this vast establishment.

Its frontage is four hundred feet in length, consisting of a centre and two wings, having a portico of the Ionic order, with fluted columns, seventy feet in breadth, and thirty feet deep. In the tympanum of the pediment is placed the royal arms, and over the entrance to the hall is placed a large illuminated clock.

Nothing can be more skilfully managed than the union here of true antique simplicity, with the conveniences and arrangements required in the present age. The great facade, with its triple colonnade, is particularly good, as also the inner court, which occupies the entire centre of the building, and is highly effective, and quite in character with the front. The only interruption to the harmony of the whole is the mixture of the arched with the straight window, and which forms an exception to the otherwise pure Grecian taste, which prevails in the rest of the building.

The great hall, which is a public thoroughfare, is eighty feet long, sixty feet wide, and fifty-three feet high; around which are the boxes for the reception of letters and newspapers. Letters may be posted here until six o'clock; and are received, on payment of an extra penny, until seven; and until half-past seven at an additional charge of sixpence.

The ground-floor of the building is appropriated to offices, having a sorting-hall one hundred and nine feet long, eighty feet broad, and twenty-eight feet high; on the first floor are the board-roan, and the secretary's offices. The second and third floors consist of sleeping-rooms for the clerks of the foreign office, and servants.

The hall presents an amusing, and highly interesting spectacle, every evening. From a quarter before six o'clock, a continuous stream of men, women, and boys pour newspapers in at an open window, from single ones (which are generally thrown at the unfortunate porter's head - often hitting the mark) to immense sacks full, under which stout men stagger; whilst a crowd throng the boxes for the reception of country letters, jostling, struggling, vociferating, and in reality obstructing each other, until the last stroke of six, when the panels are closed, as if by magic, the turbulence ceases, and the disappointed ones turn away with blank looks of chagrin, to encounter the jeering of their more fortunate compeers. Some idea of the magnitude of this admirably conducted establishment may be obtained, when we inform the reader that 2903 persons are employed within its walls, in receiving, stamping, sorting, and despatching letters; and outside in collecting from the 259 receiving houses, contained within the three mile circle (in which duty horses are employed) and in the final delivering them at their destination, which amount, in the inland department alone, to about 2,288,000 letters, and 900,000 newspapers per week. There are 20 clerks employed in defacing the Queen's head, who stamp nearly 350 each per hour. Manual labour is considerably lessened by the use of a steam-engine to convey the porters and their loads from one story to another.

At eight o'clock, P.M. precisely, letters and newspapers are despatched by the eight great arterial railways, to six hundred principal towns, from whence bags are forwarded on to eight thousand provincial post offices. On the North-Western line alone, about three tons of letters and newspapers are carried every evening, and arrive in Carlisle now, about the same time that they did in Birmingham in 1838.

The business of the London District department - formerly the "Two-penny Post" - is carried on in a hall ninety four feet long, and seventy-one feet broad, and employs a president, ninety clerks, and a numerous staff of letter carriers; 2,563 collections are made daily within the three mile circle, and ten deliveries take place in the same period. 150 horses are used to deliver.

The Dead Letter office is for letters and newspapers that cannot be delivered, either because they have no address at all, or that the addresses are unintelligible, or that they have been refused, or that the persons to whom they are addressed cannot be found, or are deceased. In 1848 there were 1,476,456 letters and newspapers received at the Dead Letter office, of which 10,000 contained bills, cash, and bank notes to the amount of £421,549.

Under the present system of pre-payment, the number of returned valentines has fallen from 120,000 to 70,000.